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By Paul C. Leibe, Staff Writer

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Tuesday morning about 140 volunteers — men and women who work at several divisions of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration — gathered for a workday at Webster Field in St. Inigoes. NOAA's Restoration Day 2005 focused on a variety of projects that included planting bay grasses; shoreline stabilization; oyster restoration; a shoreline cleanup; and removal of invasive plants.

Ben Sherman, a NOAA spokesman who made the trip to Webster Field, explained that the bay grass plugs being planted — two varieties, red head and sago pond weed — were actually grown by the volunteers in many of the NOAA offices in Silver Spring and in Washington, D.C., from seeds obtained from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "They grew them wherever they could find space," Sherman said. "On cabinet tops, in window boxes, anywhere they had room."

Pallets filled with plugs of grass were trucked to the Priest Point restoration site, where workers carried them to the shoreline and began planting. At a second site other volunteers were busy, cutting down and removing phragmites — what Sherman called "bad grass" — to make way for planting more plugs. A third team of volunteers walked along the water's edge, collecting trash and other debris. And a few hundred yards away, a fourth group loaded bags of oyster shells into a small boat and then took the shells about 50 feet offshore, where they were set in the water to establish a new aquatic habitat area.

Peyton Robertson, deputy director of NOAA's Chesapeake Bay office, said NOAA volunteers did a similar project last year in Grasonville on the Eastern Shore. Many of last year's workers were at Webster Field this week, including people from NOAA's oceanographic, fisheries, research, library and weather divisions, and other offices "representing the whole agency," he said.

"Today there's about 75 percent coverage" at the Grasonville site, he told the group Tuesday morning, "and the site is doing great. We hope for a similar success this year. "Last year," he said, comparing the two projects, "we had 1,800 plants. We have 5,400 plants here this year. We have a full day ahead of us."

Capt. Zachary Henry, commanding officer at Patuxent River Naval Air Station, told the volunteers, "We do research, development, testing and evaluation here. We're on the leading edge of naval aviation, and part of that is to protect the environment. "I'm glad to see this project is continuing today," said Henry, referred to last year's shoreline restoration project at Webster Field, where grasses were planted along 3,500 of the Priest Point shoreline.

“This is a wonderful opportunity,” said Richard Spinrad, assistant administrator of NOAA’s National Ocean Service. “This is a great continuing activity, working with Coastal America and other projects, to get the whole community to participate. The rewards will pay off for decades and centuries to come.”

Tim Keeney, NOAA’s deputy assistant secretary for oceans and atmosphere, talked about the importance of establishing partnerships in the fight to restore the environment. “We’ve got a lot of work to do,” he said, “to demonstrate our undivided commitment. What better a partner is there to have than the Navy? The Navy has some fantastic properties and is committed to restoring the environment. It’s appropriate we are on a military facility today.”

Donald Schregardus, the Navy’s deputy undersecretary for the environment, applauded the efforts of NOAA’s and Pax River’s leadership to “make this opportunity possible ... It’s a big deal to bring 150 people together to work on this project, which is very important to the Department of the Navy and to the U.S. Government. And it helps all the citizens with the restoration of the [Chesapeake] Bay.”

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